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AUTHOR Olson, Thomas O.
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ABSTRACT

The question of the proper mix of liberal arts courses and professional broadcast training courses in higher education is often debated. Many feel that broadcast education in higher education should return to a greater study of humanistic, liberal arts courses with a de-emphasis on the vocational aspects of the curricula. Vocational training is defined as teaching "how to," but not "what" or "why." Conversley, liberal arts education teaches the power of understanding and judgment. Expanded perception and extension of the ability to think logically and thoroughly about any subject, to learn the difference between dogma and reality, to note discrepancies and to acquire the habit of precise and accurate communication--in short, the development of critical thought, which may not be relevant to getting the first job but may be relevant to the survival of our civilization--should be the aim of broadcast education. (Author/HB)

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THE HUMANITIES AND PROFESSIONAL TRAINING IN BROADCAST EDUCATION

NAEB - November 17, 1975

Thomas O. Olson

Many people have commented on the proper mix of liberal arts courses and professional training courses in higher education. In 10 A.D. Ovid wrote, "note too that a faithful study of the liberal arts humanizes character and permits it not be cruel."

In the September, 1975 issue of the Saturday Review Norman Cousins wrote that "our reason for enlarging our coverage of the arts has to do with our concern over the growing national preoccupation with technology and economics and the corresponding decline in the cultural life of the nation. Perhaps the most dramatic place to observe the serious drift away from arts and ideas is the American University. Whether as a reaction to the political militancy of the Sixties, or as a response to the depressed economy, many college students today are making the mistake of viewing education entirely in functional terms. The main question asked by these student in signing up for a new course is not whether it will contribute to an understanding of the world or of human potentiality, but whether it will lead to a good job."

Recently, James Reston wrote that "Washington is full of men and women who can master a part of the problem and look after the means, but not of people who can encompass the larger question of the ends or purposes of our activities. In short, our technical education, aiming at efficiency and practical results for limited ends, seems to be more successful than our

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liberal education which is supposed to inform and train our minds in everything from logical analysis to aesthetic appreciation and also to teach us to integrate the facts that are relevant to our lives."

A while back, Robert Hutchins wrote that "a college should not aim at vocational training, because going through that routine is too easy and lulls the conscience of a faculty that does not want to face the enormously difficult task of educating the young; because the shifts in technology and the migration of workers may make such training at one time in one place useless at another time in another place; and because the great problems of our time are the right use of leisure, the performance of the duties of citizenship, and the establishment of a community in this country and the world, to none of which vocational training makes the slighest contribution. The power we want our graduates to have is power in and over the unpredictable future. The power the college is best equipped to help them gain is intellectual power. It is the power of understanding and judgment."

In the first lecture of every semester, I tell my beginning students, "this is R-T 300M, Introduction to Writing, Performance and Production for Radio and Television. This is one of two courses in which all majors must get a C in order to pass on to the intermediate courses. Both of the introductory courses will be difficult, but this one will appear the easiest, because it's fun--the romance of the lights and mikes--and because you may think that it's relevant--relevant to getting your first job. This is a how-to course--a hardware course. But hardware is soft; it's the software that's hard. Performance and production are fun and easy and relevant but having something

to say, solving a human problem--that's hard. DON'T NEGLECT WHAT YOU MAY CONSIDER IRRELEVANT COURSES. As far as I'm concerned, the function of media is to solve human problems, communicate meaningfully to every citizen of the democracy and to enrich culture. Understanding the use of the tools of communication, the "how" is easy, having something to say, the "what" and "why" is the most important part of the job. DON'T NEGLECT WHAT YOU MIGHT CONSIDER IRRELEVANT COURSES. But this course is not going to be a snap either. This is a complicated and tough art and industry as well as a communications medium and only those with something to say, who can say it well will be heard and seen. Production and performance jobs are the most difficult to get and the lowest paying. In order to succeed you must have: 1. brains and something to say, 2. you must have creativity--a way of saying it so it will be heard and seen above the din of all the other sights and sounds coming out of radio and television sets, and 3. you must have the stamina--the moxie the soul or the guts to fight off the bureaucratic administrivia of the industry. This course is designed to require the same things of you although I hope to keep the bureaucratic administrivia down."

The central idea of this essay is that Broadcast Education in higher education should return to a greater study of humanistic, liberal arts courses with a deemphasis of the vocational aspects of our curricula. By vocational training I mean courses in writing, performance and production for radio and television: how to write a commercial, how to run an audio board, how to run a camera and how to punch a switcher. Notice the repetition of the words "how to" not "what" or "why". Frequently the word "professional" is used here. It is a more laudatory word. If our professionalism over the past years has

lead to the state of the broadcast art today, I think we can do with a lot less of it. Most of what we see and hear on the broadcast media are professionally done. They're professional in the sense of "slick". But what do these programs address themselves to? Why in 1954 was there only a relatively temperate 17% of prime time entertainment devoted to "action-adventure" programming, while in 1969 that figure had risen to 80%? Where are the Paddy Chayefskys and Ed Murrows of today? There don't seem to be any coming out of our professional training programs the way Murrow and Chaefsky came out of liberal arts backgrounds.

As Bill Bluem wrote 15 years ago "The human condition does not begin to find its portrayal in control room and studios no matter how 'creatively' the techniques of production are applied. Unless our students are prepared to consider the relationships between what they are doing and the effect of it upon their own civilization, they are unable to reflect upon their role as communicators. The present hapless state of the industry for which we prepare our students may be attributed to the presence of too many doers and too few thinkers."

The word "professional" includes a necessary characteristic that it be motivated by altruism, the professionals viewing themselves as working for some aspect of the good of society. We need more of that kind of professionalism in our professional programs.

Liberal arts education, on the other hand, teaches the power of understanding and judgment as Hutchins wrote. The "what" and "why" of life not just the "how" of communications. The purpose is to expand perception, to extend the ability to think logically and thoroughly about any subject, to learn the

difference between dogma and reality, to note discrepancies and to acquire the habit of precise and accurate communications--in short--in the developing of critical thought which may not be relevant to getting the first job but may be relevant to the survival of our civilization. The liberal arts, are, in substance, the critical arts. The primary vocation of the liberal arts is to give the students the critical skills to emancipate them from the narrowness of vision, the prejudices of habit and the limitations of custom so characteristic of ordinary life in our increasingly technical and bureaucratic society.

With these definitions, it is obvious that we need both professional training and liberal arts education in our broadcast curricula, but it is also obvious that we have been overdoing the professional training at the expense of humanistic education. I do not advocate the elimination of professional training in our curricula but I do advocate its reduction. How can this be best accomplished?

First, cut down "how to" courses to no more than two each in the areas of writing, performance and production to permit more courses in literature, history, political science, music, art history, psychology, sociology and foreign languages. Basic skills can be polished in low credit hour, high lab hour practica in the campus radio and television units and other extra curricular opportunities to produce programming as well as internships with operations outside the university.

Secondly, get more courses in the curriculum that deal with humanistic concerns. Courses in programming, content analysis, audience analysis, communication theory, and management and the social responsibility necessary to

all of these areas. Use role-playing techniques, in these critical courses which puts the student on the spot regarding moral, ethical and social goals, when these goals fly in the face of paying the stockholder. Deal with the "what" and the "why".

As Bob Tieman's wrote in the Summer of 1975 issue of Western Speech Communications, attempting to resolve the conflicts of Speech Departments and Journalism Departments, "use of the term 'mass communications' suggests a desire to look beyond the restricted areas of print media or electronic media or photographic media. It suggests a desire to look at the mass audience and to study the communications process within that context. This is not only appropriate, it is desirable."

Thirdly, with the production-performance courses that remain, get more involved with the "what" and "why" of producing. Herbert Zettl's relatively new book, Sight, Sound, Motion: Applied Media Aesthetics, one of the first in our discipline that deals with the "what" and "why" of production is a boon to our students. Now they have some idea of "why" not just a formula for "how". The formula is easier for them and use but it is not enough. To teach students who do not care about being educated is hard; it's far easier to forget that they're not only going to be citizens of a democracy but responsible for communication in that society, and to set them to learning the broadcast trade. We must also get behind the production-performance formulas of our professional courses.

In this connection, as Bob Avery points out in the August, 1975 of the Public Telecommunications Review, "another factor which is beginning to influence the design of broadcast curricula in higher education is the startling growth of mass media courses in the secondary schools." For many of us, students will be coming to us having had in high school what we are now teaching. All the

more reason to upgrade the aesthetic reasons, and human effects which result from production in our curricula. We ought not fear for the loss of our jobs or a move to secondary teaching, but relish the opportunity to build upon the foundations established before our students come to us. Perhpas we may even get into questions of human value, the improvement of the quality of life the solution of social problems. I applaud the inclusion of the study of media in secondary schools. I would like to see it get into first grade, too. With the study of media in primary grades, critical discrimination may eventually replace non-selective viewing and eliminate the cry of the broadcaster that "I'm not responsible for the quality of programming; I'm giving the people what they want."

Fourthly, I wish that the traditional humanists would pay some of their valuable attention to our media. Aesthetics as a discipline absolutely ignores our media. What little aesthetic investigation is going on is a matter of our learning aesthetics, rather than aestheticians learning radio-television and working on an interface. I can only suspect that the media are too complicated for them, although Douglas Cater, Director of the Aspen Institute Program on Communications and Society sees other reasons for the neglect of radio and television by thinking people. Writing in the May 31, 1975 issue of Saturday Review, he indicates that "thinking people do not know how to cope with a system whose economic laws, they are led to believe, are immutable. Any suggestion they have for the betterment of television are characterized as naive, elitist, and offensive to the First Amendment. Thinking people have difficulty coming to grips with television because they have yet to develop satisfactory ways to gauge the effects of this environment phenomenon. Also, scientific evidence

suggest that thinking people--at least those over twenty-five are left-brained in development. That is, they rely mainly on the left hemisphere, which controls the sequential, analytical tasks based on the use of propositional thought. But television, we are informed, appeals mainly to the right hemisphere of the brain which controls appositional--that is non-sequential, non-analytic thought." We must work on the solution of these problems.

In summary, there is a great deal out there for us to study and get our students to study. And we must get at it; the traditional humanists are not doing the job! 1. Let us back off production courses so that our student can get more of the humanistic disciplines. 2. Let us get more courses in our discipline that deal with programming, content analysis, audience analysis, communication theory, appreciation and criticism, enlightened management and the social responsibility necessary to all of these. 3. Let us get more deeply into aesthetic consideration of not just the "how" of production-performance courses, but also the "why" and "what" and concern for the communication of human values as well as marketplace values. 4. Let us applaud performance, production and appreciation and criticism courses in the primary and secondary levels of education so that we can set about directing our attention to the more illusive and significant areas of mass media as yet uncharted.

Perhaps Bob Avery was correct when he wrote in the August, 1975 Issue of Public Telecommunications Review that "our efforts should not be directed toward achieving the illusive proper balance between the theoretical and the practical, but rather, toward clearly identifying the most meaningful sequence of instruction which is consistent with the specific behavioral objectives that we establish for our students."

I hope that I have identified some additional objectives which require our immediate attention, and how we might get at them.